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EDITORS: HARRY F. WARD; WINIFRED L. CHAPPELL

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THE NEW DEAL AND THE NEGRO

According to the 1930 census, there are 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States. About 9,400,000 of them are in the south. Negroes comprise 27% of the total southern population. In 325 contiguous counties, stretching from southern Maryland and eastern Virginia through eastern North Carolina, South Carolina, the central part of Georgia and Alabama into Mississippi and Louisiana, and including corners of Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas and Florida, Negroes outnumber whites. This is called the Black Belt. In another 295 counties bordering this belt Negroes are 30% of the total population. There are almost 5,000,000 in the Black Belt, 3,000,000 in the border counties.

THE NEGRO IN THE CRISIS

Unemployment Among Negroes. In early 1933, the National Urban League estimated that approximately 27% of the Negroes listed as gainfully employed in the 1930 census were jobless. It published a table of percentages of all unemployed and of Negro unemployed for 12 of our large cities. These were typical: Detroit, 26.5% of all workers unemployed; 51.3% of Negroes. Philadelphia, 25% of all workers; 39.5% of Negroes. Los Angeles 18.1% of all workers; 28.6% of Negroes. The federal Unemployment Relief Census taken in October, 1933, showed that 18.4% of the families on relief were Negro (as against 9.4% of Negroes in our total population). The Migrant Welfare Commission reported to the New Jersey State Legislature on January 15, 1934, that 75% of the Negroes in that State were unemployed.

Discrimination in Relief. The N. U. L. in a wide survey found that race or proportion of Negroes to total population influenced the amount of relief given, so that there was "rather generally" a smaller amount of relief per family for Negroes than for whites. This is in harmony with widespread testimony that Negroes are denied relief, given poorer relief, required to do work when whites are excused from work, kept waiting longer for their relief, etc. This discrimination is most pronounced in the south, but a Labor Research Association study specifies discrimination in Washington, D. C., where Negroes were Jim-Crowed at the Associated Charities, had less work and food than whites, had no clothes or rent given them, and no lunches distributed in their schools; and in Chicago where in April, 1933, the average relief for families in one Negro district was one-third less than in a typical white district.

Also in Work Relief. There is similar testimony as to discrimination in giving work relief. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People says that Negro white-collar and skilled workers have in all parts of the country been discriminated against under the CWA. The N. U. L. adds that when work is provided through federal funds Negroes get lower wages or are offered fewer days of work than whites; also that they have been denied the benefits of CWA projects on some occasions. For instance, when the government turned over $380,000 for public improvements to Jackson, Miss., a city in which Negroes constitute 45% of the population, a committee of leading Negro citizens asked for a park, a playground, a swimming pool, a library, improved streets in the Negro section, etc. The mayor answered them with a curse and suggested that they could get out of town if they didn't like the way things were being run.

UNDER THE NRA

Code Fails Negroes. Negro workers more than others need government protection. They are not getting it. This has been shown vividly by John P. Davis, a member of

the Joint Committee on National Recovery, a body composed of the Negro Industrial League (organized last June to speak for Negro workers at code hearings), and 21 other civic, church and fraternal organizations. After a personal survey of 17 textile communities in the largest textile centers of the south, to see how the code was affecting Negroes, he reports, among other things: (1) Most skilled Negro machine operators and foremen have had their wages cut to the minimum of $12 or less. (2) The groups "excepted" by the code—mostly Negroes (see below)—have had their wages decreased, but not their hours. Men work from 54 to 60 hours a week for $9 to $11; women work the same hours and receive from $5 to $8. (3) In most cases the days worked per week were cut from 6 to 3 or 4. (4) Various subterfuges reduced Negro workers to the lowest pay categories.

Code Industries Fire Negroes. The code minimum wages are "too much money for Negroes." So whites may get their jobs. It was already happening. No complete study of such displacement has been made, but instances have been reported. The American Tobacco factory in Charleston, S. C., let out 800 workers and took on whites. The Provisions Company, Inc., Columbus, Ga., (which sells supplies to the federal owned Veterans' Hospital in Tuskegee, Ala.) replaced 12 Negro women by white women soon after the company began to operate under a code.

"The Occupational Differential." The first code approved was for the cotton textile industry. At first it exempted "outside crews and cleaners." This affected 10,000 of the 13,000 Negroes in that industry. It set a precedent for the rest of the textile industry, which employed 20,000 Negroes, and for more than 30 other codes for industries that employed Negroes. For instance, the can manufacturers' code exempts from some code benefits, watchmen; the hotel code, service employees; the transit industry, janitors, watchmen, crossing flag and gatemen, etc. On January 1st by executive order the cotton textile code was made to apply—but still with discrimination—to the outside crews and cleaners. But in the six months since the code was set up prices in company-owned stores had gone up steeply. Staples priced by an investigator in August and November, in two stores with Negro patrons in Gastonia, N. C., showed such increases as: 100 lbs. cornmeal up from 75c to $1.40; rice up from 2¾c to 5c a pound; the cheapest grade of flour, up 65c for 24 lbs.

"The Geographical Differential." Soon a new device was found—and written into more than 60 codes. Different wages were set for different parts of the country. Some divide simply between the north and south. The laundry code divided the country into 6 districts. The line between two of them was so run as to split the towns of Magnate and Buffalo, Texas, in half, with wages on one side of the street less than those on the other. The lumber code allows an hourly wage rate of 17c less in the Southern Pine Region—in which 84% of all the Negro workers and only 33% of all the white workers in the industry were to be found—than for the Western Pine Region. The steel code establishes a 27c hourly rate for Jefferson County, Alabama—one of 21 districts—where Negro workers are 81% of the total in the industry, as against a 40c hourly rate in Pittsburgh and Youngstown.

"The Grandfather Clause." A third device enables industrialists to pay Negro workers less than white in the same occupation and the same industry by providing that the minimum shall be not less than 40c an hour for those workers who on July 15, 1929, were receiving more than 30c an hour, and not less than 30c an hour for those who on that date were receiving less than 30c an hour. At least 18 approved codes contain such a provision. Most Negro workers fall in the lower wage category; most white workers in the higher.

Perpetuating Historical Differentials. The purpose of the NRA was declared to be to establish decent living conditions. Yet the President has signed codes with the above devices by means of which "historical differentials against Negro workers are perpetuated." The anomaly was admitted by Secretary Perkins at the public hearing on the iron and steel code. She said that the lower rates were presumably based on the predominance of Negro workers; that Negroes were also consumers and their purchasing power was needed to provide markets and help develop purchasing power for agricultural and industrial products; that living costs for Negroes were not lower than the living costs for whites, but rather that "they lived differently and on a lower standard"; and that a sound national industrial system could not be based upon a capitalization of these lower living standards, but that a way must be found to raise them.

Discrimination at the Source. But the administration itself discriminates. General Johnson has without a single exception refused to confer with representatives of Negro labor. Two college professors, who recently surveyed the cotton growing south, testify that in the hundreds of counties visited they found not a single case where a sharecropper or a representative of the poorer ranks of farmers was put on the AAA committees. The Joint Committee on National Recovery has again and again brought the discrimination to the attention of administration and code officials. But these find ways to escape responsibility. They say that the conditions existed prior to the NRA; that the areas discriminated against are backward industrially; that the code hearings gave all a chance to be heard, etc.

UNDER THE AAA AND THE FCA

The New Deal program for agriculture also hits the Negro hard. The AAA plowing-under program often dislodges him from the farm while someone else gets the government's checks. The FCA—Federal Credit Administration—is designed to help the farmer's creditor.

Negro Tenancy. Agriculture is the largest single occupation of Negroes. According to the 1930 census there are nearly 2,000,000 Negro farmers 10 years of age and over. All but 2.2% of the land operated by them is in the southern states. Nearly 80% of Negro farmers of the south are tenants; over 87% in Mississippi and Georgia; over 85% in Arkansas and Louisiana; 83% in Alabama; nearly 80% in South Carolina. In the newer cotton areas of Texas and Oklahoma tenants do the farming and pay one-third or one-fourth of the crop as rent to an absentee landlord.

The Share-Cropper. In the southeast section of the cotton belt—the Carolinas, Georgia, Arkansas, the Mississippi delta—the share-cropper, Negro and white, is the rule. There are about 400,000 Negro share-croppers. The legal status is that of propertyless tenant. Croppers pay a specified share of their crops, usually 50%, for the use of the land. The planter usually furnishes animals and tools—if the cropper has his own, he pays a smaller share. Often the landlord, or his overseer, directs the cropper's daily work. Crop lien laws of the southern states virtually bind these Negroes to the soil. Most of them are not paid in cash and are always in debt to the planter. When the crops are sold the landlord—who keeps the books—may take part of or all the cropper's half to pay for the monthly advances of rations. It is not unusual for him to credit the cropper with cotton at the lowest price of the season while holding the cotton off the market until he gets a better price.

A Firsthand Report. The sharecroppers' clothing was "a patchwork of old scraps sewn together. Bare feet were the rule. . . . Beside the cabin lay the cotton which had been plowed under by government persuasion." ". . . the bolls opened and lay white on the ground. This caused a good deal of discussion among farmers. Most of them said it was too bad to plow it up when people were going ragged. . . Many of them said it looked as if there was something crazy somewhere."

Who Gets the Money? The plowing-up contract is made between government agent and landlord. After the 1933 contract was signed, the cropper was directed to plow up the cotton, and he had to trust the landlord for his share of the government check. Often this meant that he never saw the money. One government agent complained that the government in Washington had caused "quite a little trouble" by mistakenly mailing checks to the croppers: "Imagine giving a check to a nigger cropper! Of course I turned these checks over to the landlord anyhow. They'll have to get the croppers to endorse them . . . But that won't be hard." But the landlords themselves get but a fraction of the money, or none, if they owed the government on loans or seed. An old federal statute says that the government may not pay anything to a person who already owes it money. The AAA made a sort of a compromise which was supposed to give the farmer the money for his plow-up. But the government's deliberate intention was to help the creditor. This is indicated by the fact that the plow-up contract required that the farmer list any creditors who held a first mortgage on his crop.

How It Worked. When the farmer who had signed the contract was in debt to the government the name of the appropriate government officer was written on the check as joint payee. The check was mailed to the local county agent, who was instructed to get the farmer's endorsement and to send it to the other payee. The government credit agent was instructed to co-endorse the check and send it to the farmer with the request that he remit from it what was owed. But this formality was often omitted. The government credit agent cashed the check, paid the debt and sent the farmer the receipt, with the remainder of the cash if there was any. Thus many farmers never saw the cash for their plowed-up cotton crop.

Displacement Instead. Many share-croppers are doomed to lose more than a money return for the work they put in in the cotton fields. It is estimated that from 100,000 to 600,000 will be thrown out of their shacks by the cotton reduction plan. There was not a great displacement in 1933, partly because of government instructions to local committees to avoid it, and partly because the program got under way so late in the year. In 1934 it threatens to be ominous in extent. Is this also by government intention? AAA investigators have reported this and other tenant miseries; the 1934 contract (which bears even harder on the share cropper) carries provisions against displacement; the AAA talks about enforcement. But the New Deal program calls for taking out of cultivation land unfit to till. Secretary Wallace says the purpose is "to make permanent the retirement of 40,000,000 to 100,000,000 acres of crop lands." The Subsistence Homesteads program is supposed to provide for those let out. But there is no immediate plan for taking care of the thousands of displaced Negro share-croppers in this manner. Instead they must go on the already overburdened relief rolls.

For the Big Fellow? Part of the New Deal agricultural set-up is the Farm Credit Administration. The act creating it provided for consolidation of various farm credit agencies. Its announced purpose was to put farmer credit on a "sound business basis." New regional machinery is displacing the emergency farm credit measures, one type of

which, the federal feed and seed loan, has stood between many small farmers and ruin. The new plan calls for more collateral. The Negro farmer has none to put up. The large plantation owner welcomes the FCA but the small cotton farmers are saying, "They already have a mortgage on my land, my crop, my mules and my plow. The only thing they haven't got a mortgage on is my wife and kids. They'll be next."

USING TERROR AGAINST NEGROES

Lynching. The New Deal has done nothing to smooth the curve of lynching, which has been going up during the crisis. The N.A.A.C.P. puts the total for 1933 at 28 lynchings which it describes by name, date and place. It notes that this represents nearly a 200% increase over the 10 lynchings it reported for 1932; and that there is a "surprisingly large number of instances of apparent collusion between law officers and mobs." No lynchers were prosecuted in 1933. It is vigorously promoting the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill providing for federal prosecution of state officials who fail to make efforts to detect and punish lynchers and of alleged lynchers themselves. The International Labor Defense puts the 1933 lynchings at 47, a 25% increase over the estimate for 1932 made by the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, which was 37. The *Chicago Defender* of January 20th listed these 47 by name, place and circumstance. The I. L. D. has reports of 9 lynchings thus far in 1934.

"Legal Lynchings." Also ways are found under the law to do away with unwanted Negroes, or to punish them brutally. "Vagrancy" and "loitering" laws are employed to send Negroes to jail and, in the south, to the chain gang. (See John L. Spivak's pamphlet "On the Chain Gang," International Publishers.) Small misdemeanors are often the occasion for beatings and even murders. The case of the 9 Scottsboro boys arrested in March, 1931, has been brought to national, and even international, attention by the activities of the International Labor Defense. It is credited with the reversal of the original death verdict by the Supreme Court in November, 1932. There is no evidence to support the charge against the boys—the rape of two white women. But they are still in jail; two have been sentenced to death in subsequent trials; five are awaiting second trial; two are juveniles and await trial in the juvenile court.

When Negroes Organize. More bitter persecution of Negroes—and on a larger scale—is developing, especially in the south, to meet their growing organization for their own protection. And when white workers join with them the anger against both grows fiercer. There have been numerous brutalities, with several deaths resulting, in the effort of landlords and officials to suppress the share-croppers' union. This is a left-wing organization which started in Alabama in 1931, has spread to half a dozen southern states and claims a membership of 6000.

The Class Struggle? The union sent 16 delegates to the Farmers' Second National Congress in Chicago in November, 1933. They drove the 600 miles in a junkyard truck. One of them said on the floor that the union was urging its members against signing the government checks unless they had guarantee that they would get their share: "We say to the landlord, 'We will sign the check on the basis that you will give us our share out of your pocket first, and then we will sign the checks next. Maybe.' We say 'maybe' because we are demanding (1) that there shall be no evictions, (2) concellation of debts, (3) the right to sell our own cotton." The other side of the conflict has just been illustrated in the confirmation by the Georgia Supreme Court of the 18 to 20 year sentence of Angelo Herndon, young Negro share-cropper organizer—for "mere opinions" under a statute of Civil War days against "incitement to insurrection." The charges were that he was a member of the Communist Party; possessed the Party's literature; organized unemployed blacks and whites. The state now proposes to proceed against 6 other workers, two of them Negroes, indicted under the same statute.

One hundred and fifty representative Negro business and professional people were asked by the National Urban League what kind of a new deal the Negro was getting. Two-thirds of them replied that many gains of the last fifteen years have been irretrievably lost. A Negro worker comments, "Before the Blue Eagle we was just one-half living, but now we is only one-third living."

Is there any way of getting a decent society except by starting with the needs of those farthest down?

Is not that the guiding principle of our religion?

Sources. In addition to those quoted: printed matter of AAA and of organizations mentioned; Labor Fact Book, Vol. II; "Tightening the Cotton Belt," by Powell and Cutler, Feb. *Harpers*; "Abolish Tenant Farming" by J. M. and E. W. S. Maclachlan, *New Republic*, June 13; American Civil Liberties release.

Note to Readers. The Bulletin is not published in July and August. Fall issues will continue the analysis of the New Deal. Bulletin membership, $1.

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